

ON THE HOME FRONT

WITH MINIMUM WAGE

ALERT FIGURES are moving to and fro. Nimble fingers are flying back and forth. These belong to the millions of women workers who at work benches, power-driven machines, assembly tables—behind counters and desks, as stenographers, typists, clerical workers, spotters, checkers—in stores, laundries, and restaurants—are also serving. Eager, efficient, loyal, each worker in her own way is helping to protect America.

IS AMERICA PROTECTING THEM?

THAT GIRL in the laundry, who whisks sheets through the ironer, what is her life like? Is there enough money in her pay envelope for a new dress, an occasional movie, a Sunday at the beach? Or the girl in a retail store who packs and wraps seemingly endless rows of boxes. Do her earnings permit nourishing meals, a decent home, medical care? Or for that matter, the whole army of women workers—in return for their labors—are they being guaranteed health, reasonable comfort, and security?

PROGRESS HAS BEEN MADE

SINCE THE WORLD WAR REAL PROGRESS has been made. There is now a Federal law which assures every woman—and man, too—who works in a plant or for a firm where business crosses State lines, of at least 30 cents an hour or perhaps as much as 40 cents where industry wage orders have been issued. If the worker should be employed over 40 hours a week this same law requires that at least time and a half be paid for overtime. And by the fall of 1945 the required minimum wage will be raised to 40 cents an hour. After that date no man or women covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act can legally be paid less than \$16 for 40 hours of work.

BUT MILLIONS OF WOMEN, as well as men, are not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act. Waitresses are not, nor are employees of laundries, dry-cleaning establishments, 10-cent stores. Girls who curl our hair and manicure our nails, women who clean the offices in which we work, and make the beds and straighten the rooms each day of thousands of hotel guests are not engaged in producing goods that cross State lines. These women workers must look to the State governments for protection. In many States—in 26 in fact (and the District of Columbia)—women workers have not looked in vain. In these States laws requiring employers to pay women not less than a certain wage have been passed. These laws mean real benefits to thousands of women—a little more in the pay envelope each week.

THESE LAWS mean security for women, not only in a period of depression but even in good times. It was not in 1933, but from June 1940 to June 1941—a prosperous year—that women working in restaurants were paid, as a group, \$110,000 less than they were entitled to under the minimum-wage laws of their States. Every cent of this amount was collected by the State labor departments and refunded to the women. But what would have happened if there had been no State minimum-wage law? These women would have had \$110,000 less, for food, or clothing, or medical care during the year, than they had actually earned.

UNDERPAYMENT is not the only hardship, either. There are the innumerable “extra” charges, which so often reduce the women workers’ earnings. Probably no one knows how much workers contribute from their pay envelopes each year toward the so-called “atmosphere” of the restaurants in which they work. It is probable that the waitress pays for the fetching shepherdess or Colonial costume which she wears and which harmonizes so perfectly with the wall and table decorations. And she may have to meet sizable laundry bills to keep her uniforms clean.

ONE DAY a young woman reported to the office of a State minimum-wage department, “They take 20 per cent of our wages every week; are they allowed to do that? When we asked what this is for, they said it is to help stand the expenses of the plant.”

This girl lived in a State in which the wage order applicable to her occupation provides that no deductions can be made from the minimum wage except those required by law for social security taxes. An inspector was assigned to investigate the case. He found that the girl's complaint was justified. Within a few weeks \$725 was restored to 12 women who had been "helping stand the expenses of the plant."

MUCH REMAINS TO BE DONE

HOWEVER, MANY THOUSANDS OF WOMEN are not so fortunate, for as yet their wages have not been safeguarded. Twenty-two States have failed to pass minimum-wage laws. If these women are not covered by the Fair Labor Standards Act they are completely without protection. Of course, they can sit down, as did one girl, and write to the State Department of Labor, "Won't you please do something to make our boss pay us decent wages? He makes us work for a dollar a day. How can anyone live on that money, pay rent and gas? We have no money for food. I thought the days of slavery were gone, but it doesn't look like it in this laundry."

BUT SUCH APPEALS cannot bring the desired results in a State that has no minimum-wage law. Labor officials are helpless. Although they may sympathize with the women who turn to them with their stories of low wages in laundries and restaurants, kind words help little in paying the rent, or the doctor, or the grocer.

IF THESE WOMEN lived in a State with minimum-wage legislation something could be done about it. The Department of Labor could look into the matter. An investigation could be made to find out if women working for other firms doing the same kind of business were also being underpaid. If they were, a wage order could be issued forbidding employers to pay women in that occupation less than the minimum wage.

THE DEMOCRATIC WAY

ALL OF THIS would be done in a democratic way. Wage boards composed of persons representing the different groups who would be affected by the order when issued would recommend the minimum wage. These boards proceed carefully. Conditions differ in each occupation, and each board must study thoroughly the industry for which it is called in order to find the best possible solution for the problems that exist. Their recommendations must be based upon facts as presented to them by the State and other authorities.

EVERY STEP OF THE WAY the public interest is safeguarded. All parties concerned have an opportunity to be heard. It's a convincing demonstration of how a democracy reasonably and painstakingly provides for the participation of its citizens in the processes that immediately affect them. What we need is more wage boards, more wage orders, more women enjoying the benefits of the laws already passed, and the passage of more minimum-wage laws.

NEVER WAS IT SO NECESSARY to finish the job of protecting women workers as it is today. Production must be increased, but it can be increased only if faith in America is preserved. Much has been said about how big and strong and enduring that faith is, and it's true. Through all kinds of difficulties the belief has persisted that the American way of doing things brings more opportunity, more security, more freedom, than any other way in the world.

AND IT WILL CONTINUE to persist as long as working men and women wherever they may be—behind store counters, at factory benches—find in reasonable employment schedules and adequate earnings, tangible evidence that their well-being is of primary concern to the Nation.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

EVERY DAY people are asking, "How can I help? I want to do my part." The answer is that the home front should be our immediate concern. If you are in a community without minimum-wage legislation for women—take the offensive. Insist upon legislation to protect women workers. If you are in a State where this has already been done—you can still help. Urge increased appropriations so that enforcement methods may be improved. Point out the need to issue wage orders for all occupations. If you are in a trade union—keep in mind that while collective bargaining may safeguard your interests your sister and mother may be in an industry that is unorganized and in need of benefits that a minimum-wage law will bring.

REMEMBER that however we help on the home front we shall be defending our country just as surely as though we were driving a tank or piloting a plane. This is a war of workshops, which will be won by the nation which gives its individual citizen the greatest stake in the future.



For further details about minimum-wage legislation for women write to:

WOMEN'S BUREAU
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Washington, D. C.



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 through the work which is ours to do
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WOMEN'S BUREAU